

## Creating a Healthy Community through Policy and Environmental Change

Daily, the media reminds us of serious public health problems that plague our communities:

- ⇒ epidemic rates of obesity and diabetes
- ⇒ high rates of death from heart disease, stroke, and cancer
- ⇒ poor eating habits and lack of physical activity
- ⇒ disparities in health status among our citizens
- ⇒ rising health care costs

These health problems cannot be solved solely through changing individuals' knowledge and health choices. However, worksites, schools, and communities can make policy and environmental changes to create places where healthy choices are easy, acceptable, and fun to make. Communities that make these types of changes are healthier and more satisfying places to live, work, and play.

## Community Health Promotion Program: Leon County Health Department

The goal of the Community Health Promotion Program is to work with grassroots partnerships to facilitate policy and environmental changes around nutrition and physical activity in schools, worksites, and neighborhoods. Here are just a few examples of the technical assistance that is available from the Leon County Health Department.

### Worksites

- Conduct worksite walkability audits
- Establish worksite walking clubs
- Implement strategies to increase stair usage
- Promote heart healthy options in worksite cafeterias and vending machines
- Establish breastfeeding rooms
- Promote tobacco cessation education

### Communities

- Conduct walkability and/or bikeability audits
- Increase safe and accessible sidewalks and bike lanes
- Increase fitness trails and signage
- Establish farmers' market or farm stand programs
- Enhance and promote greenways in communities
- Establish community gardens

### Schools

- Conduct School Health Index assessments and develop plans of action around nutrition and physical activity
- Promote heart healthy options in school cafeterias and vending machines
- Establish school gardens
- Promote healthy fund-raising efforts
- Develop worksite wellness programs for teachers and staff

## What is Policy and Environmental Change?

Policy and environmental changes affect the health behaviors of many people at once, while the traditional health education model focuses on changing the behavior of individuals. Making changes in policies and environmental settings where people work, gather, and live provides the necessary support for people to increase daily physical activity and select healthier foods.

Examples of health policy changes include: community laws and regulations that restrict smoking in public places; worksite rules that allow time off during work hours for physical activity; school policies that prohibit the sale of soda at school-sponsored events.

Examples of healthy environmental changes include: including walking paths and parks into community development design; making low-fat food choices available in worksite cafeterias and vending machines; opening school recreational facilities to the community for use.

**Contact us!** For more information about these and other community health promotion ideas, contact: Connie Betterley, M.S., R.D., Community Health Promotion Coordinator, 850-487-3146 ext. 153

## Why the Focus on Policy and Environmental Change?

Do individuals learn about the importance of healthy eating, only to find their cafeteria line and vending machines at work are filled with unhealthy food and beverages? Or, understand the importance of being active daily, but live in a neighborhood with no sidewalks or safe places to ride a bike?

One-time events and education can raise awareness of healthy behaviors and be good marketing tools. A strong turnout may cause organizers to think "Job well done! We've made some changes." However, there are rarely long-term health behavior changes from such events. On the other hand, policy and environmental changes have a much greater impact on large numbers of people and help sustain positive healthy eating and physical activity changes over the long term.